



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FINANCE TESTIMONY

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster
Governor's 2009-11 Biennial Budget, Assembly Bill 75
State Capitol — March 19, 2009

Good afternoon. I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to join you here today. I would like to make some brief remarks, and then I'll be glad to answer questions you may have.

For eight years, it has been my honor to address you as Wisconsin's chief advocate for students and their schools. I am grateful for the support I have had from members of this Legislature, and it is my privilege to serve as state superintendent.

In these tough and necessarily austere economic times, I thank Governor Doyle for continuing to make public education a priority in Assembly Bill 75, the 2009-11 biennial budget.

When I hear the words, "we are facing the toughest economic challenges since the Great Depression," I, like you, know that all of us will be called upon in unprecedented ways to keep our families and communities together. Here in Wisconsin, we have long held the belief that the days of our children will be better than our own. Yet today, the number of children from families eligible for free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches continues to climb, reaching 35 percent statewide this school year. This is not just an issue affecting our large urban districts, but also our suburban and rural districts as well. Bayfield, for example, has a rate of 73 percent, Madison is at 48 percent, Green Bay is at 50 percent, and Milwaukee has 79 percent.

It is especially important as we move through these hard times, that we work together to ensure that every child is prepared and graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the reality of our increasingly interconnected world. We must work together to ensure that every child, no matter the economic or educational level of their parents, their race, ethnicity, the language they speak at home, or where they happen to live in our state, graduates ready to successfully take on the next chapter of their life.

You understand that this is more than an education issue; it is a moral and social justice issue; and it is an economic imperative for our state and nation, especially now. We need economic recovery and re-investment, and education is our best investment for the future of Wisconsin and our nation.

Just last week, President Obama outlined his vision for education reform in this country, focusing on several areas that both Governor Doyle and I have continually made priorities in Wisconsin. These priorities also are seen in some of the targeted increases found in AB75.

For example, we must continue to invest our resources in the front end of the education continuum. It is these early learning opportunities that truly return the most for our investment. The SAGE program is vital to our students' success because it allows schools to create learning environments that support student achievement. AB75 prioritizes precious GPR dollars to fully fund the SAGE program at the statutory \$2,250 per pupil and to increase the new, highly successful 4-year-old kindergarten start-up grants.

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Full funding for incentives that help our veteran educators to pursue Wisconsin master teacher certification, which matches that provided for National Board Certified Teachers, also are included in AB75, as per my budget request. Districts from Bayfield to Milwaukee will benefit from this investment.

In Wisconsin, our public libraries have long been centers of our communities, and now they are also providing high-tech, free access to information, job announcements, and training resources. As families look to stretch their own budgets, they are increasingly turning to their local public library. AB75 critically provides an additional \$1 million for Public Library System Aid that will maintain the state's funding level at 8 percent. In addition, public library systems provide access to the Internet for individuals who otherwise would not have it. For this reason, the DPI supports the use of the Universal Service Fund to maintain the state's current support for public library systems.

I also highly support the small but critical increase in funding for Library Service Contracts in the budget. The largest beneficiary of these contracts is the Wisconsin Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. These additional funds are needed to reflect contract cost increases and to ensure these services can be continued.

In addition, the \$679,000 in the governor's budget for BadgerLink will allow us to continue our present level of services. By doing this, we have saved Wisconsin citizens at least \$66 million compared to what would be spent if each library contracted separately for the same services.

The governor recommends providing three new revenue limit exemptions to schools for costs associated with implementing school safety measures, school nurses, and high transportation costs. These voluntary flexibility measures—leveraging other community resources—are a wise option to provide school boards a tool to help address local school safety, health, and transportation needs. I encourage you to adopt them.

We know that a struggling economy, increased poverty, escalating costs, and revenue caps are all impacting educational opportunities right here in Wisconsin. Our schools are our hope for the future.

In these difficult times, the people of Wisconsin turn everyday to our public schools for stability and support. If you want your spirit and soul re-invigorated, visit the schools in any of our 426 school districts.

Our children are watching us, watching and learning from the decisions we will make during tough times. We must continue to bring people together around our shared values and responsibility of moving Wisconsin forward through a strong public education system. Education has been and will continue to be the foundation of our American democracy.

Again, thank you for your time today. I and my staff would now be able to answer any questions you may have.

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Elizabeth Burmaster is the elected state superintendent of public instruction.

NOTE: A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available for download on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/vm-media.html>.